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Pentagon Formally Rescinds COVID Vaccine Mandate for Troops + More

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By The Defender Staff

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Pentagon Formally Rescinds COVID Vaccine Mandate for Troops

U.S. News & World Report reported:

> The Pentagon on Tuesday announced it is formally ending its COVID-19 vaccine mandate for troops after President Biden signed into law a massive defense spending bill that required the measure's termination, bringing a close to the contentious issue that drew considerable ire from Republicans.
>
> Notably, the memorandum dated Jan. 10 and signed by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stated that standing policies regarding vaccines remain in effect. Those policies include the "ability of commanders to consider, as appropriate, the individual immunization status of personnel in making deployment, assignment and other operational decisions, including when vaccination is required for travel to, or entry into, a foreign nation."
>
> The mandate led to the discharge of more than 8,000 active-duty service members who refused to get the vaccine. The memo stated that for any service members "administratively discharged on the sole basis that the Service member failed to obey a lawful order to receive a vaccine for COVID-19, the Department is precluded by law from awarding any characterization less than a general (under honorable conditions) discharge."

35% of Parents Oppose School Vaccine Mandates

ProCon reported:

> According to a Dec. 2022 Kaiser Family Foundation survey, 35% of parents now oppose school vaccine mandates, up from 23% in Dec. 2019.

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Just 28% of adults overall, parents or not, stated that parents should be able to opt their children out of school vaccine mandates, up from 16% in an Oct. 2019 Pew Research Poll.

Experts believe the opposition may be more about parental rights than opposition to the vaccines themselves as 80% of parents agreed that the benefits of the MMR (measles, mumps, and rubella) vaccine outweigh the risks.

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) recommends getting 29 doses of 10 vaccines (plus a yearly flu shot after six months old) for kids aged 0 to six.

After Paying Twitter Millions, FBI Says Other Possible Big Tech Payments Are Protected for 'Law Enforcement Purposes'

The Daily Wire reported:

The FBI denied a request to make public any payments it may have made to Google or Meta because such records could reveal protected information about law enforcement.

The FBI was recently revealed to have paid the social media company Twitter $3.4 million to process requests for information on or censorship of numerous accounts on the platform. Through a Freedom Of Information Act (FOIA) request, The Daily Wire sought similar records of payments the agency may have made to Meta, which controls Facebook and Instagram, and Google, which controls YouTube.

"The FBI can neither confirm nor deny the existence of records responsive to your request pursuant to FOIA Exemption (b)(7)(E) [5 U.S.C.§552 (b)(7)(E)]. The nature of your request implicates records the FBI may or may not compile for law enforcement purposes," the FBI told The Daily Wire on Monday in a written response to a Dec. 20 FOIA request.

A slate of communications and records from Twitter released by its new head, Elon Musk, revealed that the FBI had a relationship with the social media giant that developed into a partnership in which the agency would pay the company to process requests for censorship and information on certain social media accounts.

Social Media Bosses Could Face Jail if They Breach Rules on Children Under U.K.'s Online Safety Bill

The Epoch Times reported:

Tory MPs are planning an amendment to the Online Safety Bill that would make tech executives criminally liable for children's duty of care failures. Conservative MP Miriam Cates and other MPs including Sir William Cash, Andrea Leadsom, Julian Lewis, Lia Nici, Tim Loughton, Lee Anderson and former Home Secretary Priti Patel are backing an amendment to new laws regulating online spaces that would introduce powers to jail tech bosses.

In an editorial for The Telegraph on Monday, Cates said she believes that "future generations will look back on children's online harms the same way we look back on children who were forced to work down mines."

Cates pointed to TikTok, which is owned by Chinese company ByteDance, and an investigation by the Centre for Countering Hate in December that found that TikTok was pushing suicide, self-harm and eating disorder content via its "For You" feed.

"Without urgent action, we risk passing a Bill that lacks the teeth it so desperately needs to force global tech firms to tackle the systemic issues that harm children online," Cates wrote.

Lawsuit Pushes Addiction Case Against Social Media Firms

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Axios reported:

> A major new federal lawsuit playing out this winter argues that social media platforms are "defective" products that can be held legally responsible for the harm they cause to younger users.
>
> Why it matters: Plaintiffs in the more than 100 cases that have been consolidated into one federal courtroom say services like Facebook, TikTok, Snapchat and YouTube are addictive by design — and lawyers working on the case compare their work to the fight against tobacco or opioids.
>
> Driving the news: A new master complaint in the case, filed in the Northern District of California, is due to be filed next month. An essential question, in this case, is whether the sites named in the suits and their algorithms can be considered "products" — and if so, whether the companies can be held liable for product designs that are charged with causing or contributing to harm.
>
> Details: One filing against Meta, brought by parents of a minor last December which will be part of the larger lawsuit, describes a "defective" Instagram design that does not warn teens the app is "designed to be addictive."

Massachusetts Transit Agency Offers to Rehire 8 Former Employees Fired for Being Unvaccinated

NTD reported:

> The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA) is offering jobs back to eight former employees that it fired for refusing to be vaccinated against COVID-19.
>
> The former MBTA employees were fired after Republican Massachusetts Gov. Charlie Baker issued Executive Order No. 595, in August of 2021. The order required all state-level executive branch employees to be vaccinated against COVID-19, including MBTA employees.
>
> MBTA recently rescinded its vaccine and mask requirements for employees while, last week, the Boston Herald reported the agency would rehire eight employees who lost their jobs for refusing the prior vaccination policy. The offer to rehire the former unvaccinated MBTA employees does not include back pay at this time.

Stanford University Backs Away From Its Harmful Language List

Forbes reported:

> Facing mockery, ridicule and widespread internal and external criticism, Stanford University finally took down its Elimination of Harmful Language Initiative (EHLI) website this week. The move is the latest in an unfolding saga that's thrust Stanford into the spotlight on campus free speech controversies.
>
> Claiming that the EHLI was "intended as a guide, not a mandate," to replace racist and harmful terminology used in IT communications, Steve Gallagher, Stanford's chief information officer, acknowledged this past Wednesday that while the "primary motivation of this initiative was always to promote a more inclusive and welcoming environment where individuals from all backgrounds feel they belong," it was time to pull back and reconsider.
>
> The problem with this kind of censorship is not only that it chills free speech, it trivializes language that actually is harmful and hurtful when it comes from the mouths of people who intend to be mean.
>
> Stanford's leadership has now weighed in and tried to distance itself from the EHLI. Stanford President Marc Tessier-Lavigne issued a statement last week saying that the effort did not represent university policy and acknowledging that "many have expressed concern that the work of this group could be used to censor or cancel speech at Stanford.

Iran to Use Facial Recognition to Identify Women Without Hijabs

Ars Technica reported:

> Last month, a young woman went to work at Sarzamineh Shadi, or Land of Happiness, an indoor amusement park east of Iran's capital, Tehran. After a photo of her without a hijab circulated on social media, the amusement park was closed, according to multiple accounts in Iranian media. Prosecutors in Tehran have reportedly opened an investigation.
>
> Shuttering a business to force compliance with Iran's strict laws for women's dress is a familiar tactic to Shaparak Shajarizadeh. She stopped wearing a hijab in 2017 because she views it as a symbol of government suppression, and recalls restaurant owners, fearful of authorities, pressuring her to cover her head.
>
> But Shajarizadeh, who fled to Canada in 2018 after three arrests for flouting hijab law, worries that women like the amusement park worker may now be targeted with face recognition algorithms as well as by conventional police work.
>
> After Iranian lawmakers suggested last year that face recognition should be used to police hijab law, the head of an Iranian government agency that enforces morality law said in a September interview that the technology would be used "to identify inappropriate and unusual movements," including "failure to observe hijab laws." Individuals could be identified by checking faces against a national identity database to levy fines and make arrests, he said.

ChatGPT Writes Well Enough to Fool Scientific Reviewers

Gizmodo reported:

> The internet's new favorite toy, ChatGPT, accomplishes some things better than others. The machine learning-trained chatbot from OpenAI can string together sentences and paragraphs that flow smoothly on just about any topic you prompt it with. But it cannot reliably tell the truth. It can act as a believable substitute for a text-based mental health counselor. But it cannot write a passable Gizmodo article.
>
> On the list of concerning things the AI text generator apparently can do, though, is fool scientific reviewers — at least some of the time, according to a pre-print study released Tuesday from Northwestern University and University of Chicago researchers. Published academic science relies on a process of article submission and review by human experts in relevant fields. If AI can routinely fool those reviewers, it could fuel a scientific integrity crisis, the new study authors warn.
>
> Sixty-eight percent of the time, the reviewers correctly identified when an abstract was the product of ChatGPT. But in the remaining 32% of cases, the subjects were tricked. And that's despite just 8% of the falsified abstracts meeting the specific formatting and style requirement for the listed journal. Plus, the reviewers falsely identified 14% of the real article abstracts as having been AI-generated.

WHO Urges Travelers to Wear Masks as New COVID Variant Spreads

Reuters reported:

> Countries should consider recommending that passengers wear masks on long-haul flights, given the rapid spread of the latest Omicron subvariant of

COVID-19 in the United States, World Health Organization (WHO) officials said on Tuesday.

In Europe, the XBB.1.5 subvariant was detected in small but growing numbers, WHO and Europe officials said at a press briefing.

XBB.1.5 — the most transmissible Omicron subvariant detected so far — accounted for 27.6% of COVID-19 cases in the United States for the week ended Jan. 7, health officials have said.

Tokyo Lodges Protest After China Punishes Japanese Travelers Over COVID Test Requirements

The Guardian reported:

Japan has lodged a protest with Beijing over its decision to suspend the issuance of visas to Japanese citizens in retaliation for COVID testing requirements for travelers from China.

Chief cabinet secretary Hirokazu Matsuno characterized the move as an act of revenge rather than a public health measure and requested China reverse the decision. "It is regrettable that China unilaterally has taken visa suspension action for reasons other than steps for the coronavirus," he said on Wednesday.

China's government suspended the processing of the visas on Tuesday after the suspension of short-term visas for South Korean citizens earlier that day.

Japan and South Korea are among a number of nations, including the U.S., Australia, Canada, Morocco and a number of European countries that have announced new entry restrictions or measures for travelers from China in light of the mass outbreak of COVID-19.

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